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The Surgeon General of the U.S. Navy: A Statistical and Biographical Retrospective, Part I

Filed under [Leadership](#), [Navy History](#) {[no comments](#)}

By André B. Sobocinski, historian, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery.



Vice Adm. Forrest Faison is Navy

Medicine's 38th surgeon general and 42nd chief, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) in December 2015, [Vice Adm. Forrest Faison](#) took the helm of Navy Medicine as the 38th [surgeon general](#) and 42nd [chief, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery \(BUMED\)](#). He is continuing a tradition of Navy Medicine leadership extending back 173 years and following an impressive array of world-renown clinicians and war heroes, medical educators, authors and even an explorer to boot.

Prior to becoming Navy [surgeon general](#), [Vice Adm. Faison](#) served as commanding officer of [Naval Medical Center San Diego](#), [Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton](#) and Expeditionary Medical Force (EMF) Kuwait. In fact, thirty-three (78 percent) [surgeons general](#) were former commanders of Navy hospitals. Prior to 2011—when the [Walter Reed Army Hospital](#) merged with the [National Naval Medical Center \(NNMC\)](#)—command of either the [NNMC](#) or the Naval Hospital Bethesda was a key stepping stone for selection. Since August 1942, when [NNMC](#) was commissioned, eight of the next twenty Navy [surgeons general](#) (or 40 percent) could claim command of Bethesda.



Vice Adm. Robinson, the 36th Surgeon General, was one of eight commanders of Bethesda to become the Navy's top doctor. BUMED Archives

While most of the Navy [surgeons general](#) held a single hospital command, six Navy [surgeons general](#) held three hospital commands over their careers. To date, only one Navy surgeon general could boast of having four hospital commands—Vice Adm. Willard Arentzen, the 27th [surgeon general](#), served as commanding officer of hospitals in Portsmouth, Virginia, [San Diego, California](#), Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and the military treatment facility (MTF) aboard the hospital ship USS *Sanctuary*, prior to his selection. Of the nine Navy [surgeons general](#) who commanded hospitals overseas, three held commands of wartime facilities (i.e., Naval Station Hospital Da Nang, Vietnam, Naval Hospital Tabasco, Mexico, and EMF Kuwait).



Vice Adm. James Zimble, the 30th Surgeon General, was the only Medical Officer of the Marine Corps to become the Navy's top doctor. BUMED Archives

Of the 42 physicians appointed as Navy surgeon general, eight had prior service aboard a hospital ship. Of these, Vice Adm. Robert Brown was the only one to serve aboard three hospital ships (*Solace*, *Repose*, and *Tranquility*). Rear Adm. Charles Stokes was the only Navy surgeon general to claim duty as commanding officer of the actual hospital ship and not merely its MTF (USS *Relief*, 1909).

[Vice Adm. Faison](#) is the eleventh Navy [surgeon general](#) since World War I to have served with the Marine Corps. Of these eleven leaders, Rear Adm. H. Lamont Pugh holds the distinction as the only enlisted Marine to become Navy surgeon general. Pugh enlisted as a Marine Corps private at the start of World War I.

Since the position was created in June 1954, there has only been one [medical officer of the Marine Corps](#) (Vice Adm. James Zimble) selected as Navy [surgeon general](#). As for Army service, only Rear Adm. Perceval Rossiter, the 18th Navy [surgeon general](#), could claim this distinction. Rossiter served as a physician in the U.S. Army from 1898 to 1902.



Rear Adm. William Van Reypen, the 11th Surgeon General, was one of 11 Civil War veterans to serve as the head of the Navy Medical Department. BUMED Archives

A veteran of the Spanish-American War and Philippines Insurrection, Rossiter could be called a “part of a trend” among Navy [surgeons general](#). 74 percent of Navy [surgeons general](#) were veterans of 16 wars and conflicts going back to the War of 1812. Remarkably, twelve of these war veterans—nearly 40 percent—served in the Civil War. To date, the Civil War has produced more Navy [surgeons general](#) than any other conflict including World War II, Korea and Vietnam combined. Incredibly, Navy Medicine went through a 31- year span from 1871 to 1902, headed by a Civil War veteran. Beginning in 1955, Navy Medicine went through a 21-year span of being headed by a World War II veteran.

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Written on January 15, 2016 at 2:56 pm by [Navy Medicine](#)

The Surgeon General of the U.S. Navy: A Statistical and Biographical Retrospective, Part II

Filed under [Leadership](#), [U.S. Marine Corps](#), [U.S. Navy](#) {[no comments](#)}

By André B. Sobocinski, historian, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery.

History tells us that the position of deputy Navy surgeon general has not automatically led to selection as Navy [surgeon general](#). [Vice Adm. Faison](#) is the eleventh of 66 (or 17 percent) deputy surgeons general to have been promoted to the highest office in Navy Medicine. Of these eleven individuals, six were appointed while serving as deputy Navy surgeon general.



Admiral Faison seen here at the Naval Medical Center San Diego, is only the second pediatrician to be appointed Surgeon General. U.S. Navy

[Vice Adm. Faison](#), a Virginia native, is the third Navy [surgeon general](#) from the Old Dominion state. Statistically, East Coast states have produced the most Navy [surgeons general](#) and three states in particular. Pennsylvania, New York and Maryland have produced 16 of the 42 Navy surgeons general. Of the 21 states (including District of Columbia) that have produced a Navy surgeon general, only seven are located west of the Mississippi. Only one Navy [surgeon general](#) could claim a foreign country as his birth home. Dr. William Grier, the fifth Navy [surgeon general](#), was born in Ireland and immigrated to the United States as a child.



Rear Adm. L. Lamont Pugh, the 21st Surgeon General, seen here during a visit to Korea in 1952. Pugh is the only enlisted Marine to become Surgeon General of the Navy. BUMED Archives

East Coast medical schools also dominate among past Navy [surgeons general](#). Thirty-four attended medical schools east of the Mississippi. Philadelphia medical schools claim the most (12) Navy [surgeons general](#). Of these, the University of Pennsylvania, leads the charge with nine graduates. Interestingly, [Vice Adm. Faison](#) is the first graduate of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS) to serve as Navy surgeon general.

Before residency programs and specialization in medicine, most Navy [surgeons general](#) could be called generalists. A few exceptions do exist. The first [chief of BUMED](#), Dr. William P.C. Barton was one of the foremost medical botanists in the United States. Barton published numerous botanical tracts through his career and taught a course on the subject at Thomas Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Dr. Thomas Harris, the second chief of BUMED, was a noted surgeon and medical educator who helped promote the cause of clinical and anatomical education in the country. Years later, [Navy surgeons general](#) like Rear Adm. Edward Stitt would help define fields of bacteriology, tropical

medicine, and medical research.

Over the last seventy years, general surgery and internal medicine have dominated as the two leading specialties among Navy [surgeons general](#). Since 1945, there have been seven general surgeons and five internists heading up the Navy Medicine. Over this span, two ophthalmologists, one OB/GYN and one psychiatrist have served as Navy [surgeon general](#). [Vice Adm. Faison](#) is the second pediatrician to serve as the Navy's top doctor. He shares this distinction with Vice Adm. Harold Koenig, the 32nd [Navy surgeon general](#).



At just 43 years old, Surgeon Phineas Horwitz, the 4th Chief of BUMED, was the youngest person to serve as head of the Medical Department. BUMEDArchives

Since October 1965, all [Navy surgeons general](#) have served at the rank of vice admiral. Prior to this, nine Navy surgeons general operated as commodore and twelve as rear admiral (upper half). The most junior person to head Navy Medicine was Dr. Phineas Horwitz who, owing to his length of service, was equivalent to a lieutenant commander. At 43 years old, Horwitz was also the youngest person to stand at the helm.

Since 1842, the average length of tenure as Navy [surgeon](#) general is just over four years. Two outliers should be noted. Commodore Newton Bates was only 18 days into office when he died of renal failure on October 18, 1897. And Dr. William Whelan served for nearly 12 years (September 1853-June 1865) before dying in office. In the twentieth century, Ross McIntire would serve for seven years, six of these wearing a “third hat” as primary physician for [President Franklin Roosevelt](#). McIntire is one of five [Navy](#) surgeons general to attend a sitting president.

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The Surgeon General of the U.S. Navy: A Statistical and Biographical Retrospective, Part III

Filed under [Leadership](#), [Navy History](#), [U.S. Marine Corps](#) {[2 comments](#)}

By André B. Sobocinski, historian, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery.

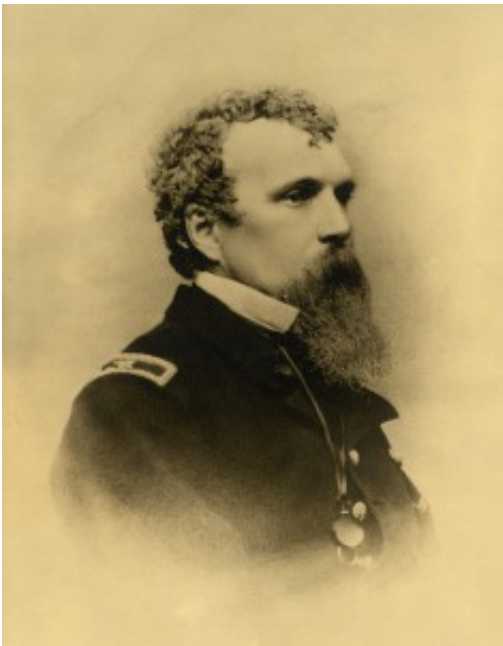
[Navy](#) surgeons general have been a well-published lot over the years. Their literary output includes textbooks, articles, clinical studies, histories, memoirs, travelogues and even one epic poem.



Commodore William Maxwell Wood, the 1st Surgeon General, documented tours of duty aboard ship with two popular travelogues. BUMED Archives

Surgeon William P.C. Barton was one of most published [BUMED chiefs](#) since 1842. Over the course of his career, Barton authored six books including the very ambitiously named hospital administration text, *A Treatise Containing a Plan for the Internal Organization and Government of Marine Hospitals in the United States: Together with a Scheme for Amending and Systematizing the Medical Department of the United States Navy* (1814). Barton also wrote a guide for practicing medicine in the West Indies, and a number of important botanical texts. His compendiums *Flora Philadelphiae Prodrumus* (1815), *Vegetable Materia Medica of the United States* (2 volumes, 1817-1825) and *Flora of North America* (1821-1823) were standards of their day and also included his own hand-colored illustrations.

Since the beginning of the U.S. Navy, physicians have consistently been among the most literary of a ship's company, authoring texts on medical topography, climatology, zoology, geology, and botany. As far back as the 1820s, a number of Navy surgeons published travelogues documenting their journeys at sea. The first Navy surgeon general, Commodore William Maxwell Wood, continued this tradition with two travelogues, *Wandering Sketches of People and Things in South America, Polynesia, California, and Other Places Visited During a Cruise Aboard the U.S. Ships Levant, Portsmouth, and Savannah* (1849) and *Fankwei: or The San Jacinto in the Seas of India, China, and Japan* (1859).



Commodore James Croxall Palmer, the 3rd Surgeon General, served with the U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842. During a voyage to the southernmost continent, Palmer was inspired to write the epic poem *Thulia*. BUMED Archives

One of Wood's successors as Navy [surgeon general](#) was Commodore James Croxall Palmer, formerly of the famed [U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842](#). A voyage aboard USS *Flying Fish* to the southern continent inspired Palmer to pen the epic poem [Thulia: A Tale of the Antarctic](#) (1843). Four verses of the poem would later be set to guitar by famed American geologist James Dana. At a special event in 2009, the [U.S. Geological Survey](#) hosted a public performance of the Palmer-Dana song.

The development of bacteriology and the birth of public health movements in the late nineteenth century would go far to reshape our understanding of disease and the means of disease prevention. This new age of medicine would also help remold the role of the Navy physician. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Rear Adm. Edward Stitt helped advance and further define the fields of bacteriology, medical research and preventive medicine with the seminal textbooks *Practical Bacteriology, Hematology, and Animal Parasitology* (1923) and *Diagnosis and Treatment of Tropical Diseases* (1929).

Navy surgeons general have also authored a number of autobiographical and biographical works. Vice Adm. Ross McIntire's memoirs, *The White House Physician* (1946) and *Twelve Years with the President* (1948) were written to shed perspective on his controversial role as [President Franklin Roosevelt's](#) primary physician. Rear Adm. H. Lamont Pugh's autobiography *Navy Surgeon* (1959) is a frank and detailed account of his 35-year career in the Navy and Marine Corps.



Commodore Jonathan Foltz, the 2nd Surgeon General, was the subject of the 1931 biography, *Surgeon of the Seas: The Adventurous Life of Surgeon General Jonathan M. Foltz in the Days of Wooden Ships*. BUMED Archives

Several Navy [surgeons](#) general have even documented the lives of other historical figures. In 1837, Dr. Thomas Harris, the second [BUMED chief](#), penned a biography of his friend, shipmate and patient in *The Life and Services of Commodore William Bainbridge, United States Navy*. Navy Surgeon General William Braisted co-authored a biography of his mentor and predecessor in *The Life Story of Presley Marion Rixey, Surgeon General, U.S. Navy, 1902-1910* (1930).

In 1931, Charles Foltz, the son of a former Navy [surgeon general](#), published the biography, *Surgeon of the Seas: The Adventurous Life of Surgeon General Jonathan M. Foltz in the Days of Wooden Ships*. The colorful life of Foltz included service in the battle of Quallah Battoo, the Mexican War and Civil War, friendships with David Farragut and Samuel F.B. Morse, and a tour as White House physician. Eight decades after it was first published, the Foltz biography is still a very engaging read.

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